

CHIP expansion on House floor

By MIKE DENNISON – IR State Bureau - 04/26/07

HELENA — The bill expanding the Children's Health Insurance Plan in Montana to cover at least 2,000 additional kids finally made it to the House floor Wednesday, setting up a vote this week on whether to approve it.

Also on Wednesday, the state Senate endorsed a "backup" proposal that would provide health coverage for nearly 5,000 additional poor children, in case the bill expanding CHIP doesn't pass.

"I'm concerned that we might be leaving this session without doing anything for children's health care," said Sen. Christine Kaufmann, D-Helena, who brought forth the backup bill.

The CHIP measure, Senate Bill 22, would increase a family's income ceiling for CHIP eligibility from 150 percent to 175 percent of the federal poverty level, or about \$30,000 for a family of three.

Supporters have said the expanded eligibility will bring health coverage to at least 2,000 additional children, at a cost of \$2 million to the state over the next two years. CHIP currently insures about 13,200 kids in Montana.

House Republican leadership had yet to schedule a floor vote on SB22, even though the bill emerged from committee on Tuesday.

Rep. Mary Caferro, D-Helena, asked the full House Wednesday to overrule leadership and place the bill on the House agenda for Thursday. Seven Republicans joined all 49 Democrats in favor of her request, and the measure faces a debate and vote today on the House floor.

Caferro pointed out that legislators themselves are accepting health insurance from the state at a cost of \$550 a month. If lawmakers are willing to accept taxpayer-funded insurance for themselves, they should support taxpayer-funded insurance for poor children through CHIP, which costs the state \$28 a month per child, she said.

"Kids can't buy health insurance; we can — and taxpayers are paying our way," she said.

Surveys have shown that 37,000 children in Montana are without health insurance, she added.

Rep. Tom McGillvray, R-Billings, spoke against the program, saying a family earning 175 percent of the poverty level should be able to set aside money for their children's health care.

"We need to take a stand somewhere on how we're going to spend money in this country on health care and other areas," he said. "What we are doing with continued

expansion of programs like this (is) putting people in a place where they are going to be perpetual dependents, in perpetual poverty.”

CHIP is funded by the state and federal government, which pays 80 percent of the cost.

Later Wednesday, the Senate voted 30-20 to endorse House Bill 577, which would expand the eligibility for children covered by Medicaid, the state-federal program that pays health care bills for the poor.

HB577 says kids from ages 6 to 19 can be covered by Medicaid if their family's income is up to 133 percent of the federal poverty level. Current law says these kids are covered only up to 100 percent of the poverty level, or \$17,170 for a family of three.

HB577 had been killed by the Senate Finance and Claims Committee, but the Senate agreed Wednesday to bring it to the Senate floor for a vote.

Kaufmann said she's worried that the CHIP expansion bill won't pass, and that the Medicaid expansion will serve as a backup that can provide health coverage for uninsured kids in poor families.